

# The Enduring Gap: Decentralisation Reform and Youth Participation in Local Rural Governance

## Introduction

Cambodia's democratic decentralisation programme is now more than a decade old. The country's record in achieving the major objectives of the decentralisation programme has been somewhat mixed (see, for example, Öjendal and Kim 2006; Kim and Öjendal 2009; Kim 2012; Heng, Kim and So 2011; Heng and So 2012; Malena and Chhim 2009; EIC 2010; CDRI 2013). Decentralisation reforms have contributed to political pluralism, thus laying the groundwork for local democracy. Citizens are now allowed to choose local leaders and participate and communicate their preferences and needs for local community development through participatory local governance. However, the level of actual citizen participation in local development is low, hampered by the inability of councils to meet local needs, preoccupation with daily living, historical reluctance, invitation formalities, and so on. Also, participation is passive and often driven by self-interest for reasons of immediate benefit.

Although many research studies have looked at the contribution of decentralisation to general citizen participation in local politics and development, there has been no systematic assessment with youth participation as a focus.<sup>1</sup> This study attempts to fill that gap in the literature by addressing the research question: How have youth used the space opened by the decentralisation reform? The study findings provide critical insights to enable a discussion on whether decentralisation is unfolding as a means for promoting youth participation in local rural governance.

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<sup>1</sup> This study adopts the definition of youth as those between the ages of 18 and 30.

## Assessing youth participation

The study assessed youth participation in local rural governance under the framework of three broad indicators proposed by the Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE 2002), namely civic, political and electoral. Each indicator comprises a number of activities. The civic indicator consists of volunteering for non-electoral organisations, active membership of groups or organisations, fund-raising for charities, and community problem-solving. The political indicator includes contacting officials, sending or signing email and written petitions, contacting print and broadcast media, protesting, boycotting and canvassing. The electoral indicator covers voting regularly, persuading others, contributing to political parties and assisting candidates with campaigns. (For a more detailed discussion of the indicators, see Heng, Vong and Chheat 2014.)

To keep the study within manageable limits, two activities from each indicator were selected to give a snapshot of Cambodian youth participation in local rural governance: volunteering for non-electoral organisations and active membership of groups or organisations for the civic indicator; contacting officials and signing written petitions for the political indicator; and voting regularly and assisting with campaigns for the electoral indicator.

Radical or unconventional forms of participation such as protests or demonstrations are not covered by the study because they are not applicable to the hybrid polity of Cambodia. Scholars (including Chandler 1996, 2000; Martin 1994; Hughes 2009) suggest that cultural and social movements, which have been of historical importance in bringing about social mobilisation, are uncommon in Cambodian society. Especially in the Khmer Rouge era, traditional associations and forms of collective action were atomised. Moreover, during the 1990s and 2000s, there

has been documented evidence of government suppression and violent crackdown on peaceful social and political movements (Hughes 2009).

### Methodology

Fieldwork was carried out from September 2013 to February 2014 in four communes in three provinces: Prey Veng, Kampong Cham and Battambang. The study sites were selected based on loose criteria of broad geographical variation, presence of local youth associations and existing rapport with local officials. Selection of the sites was aimed at highlighting key thematic issues of local youth participation rather than producing comparative case studies.

The study adopted a qualitative approach, and information was collected through focus group discussions (FGDs) and semi-structured interviews. To explore the perspectives of young people with varying degrees of social experience, two FGDs were conducted in each commune, one with youth organisation volunteers and the other with youth not involved in youth-led networks; four to six young people, evenly divided by gender, participated in each discussion. Interviews were conducted with commune chiefs and councillors, village chiefs, young people and local youth organisation representatives, as well as with national youth organisation leaders and official government agencies on youth. In total, 33 individual interviews were held.

An extensive review of the literature, including books, journal articles, reports and research studies, provided an overview of theoretical and empirical perspectives on political participation and youth dynamics. A number of surveys supply important data on youth participation in Cambodia, and this study aims to build on those datasets to provide a more detailed description.

The study, while exploratory in nature, attempts to highlight key thematic issues to serve as a

foundation for further research and to contribute to debates on youth development in Cambodia. Due to the data collection methods and the small number of informants interviewed, the main limitation of the study was the inability to disaggregate data (for instance, by gender, economic status, education, political affiliation and geographical location).

### Key findings

The findings suggest that youth participation in local rural governance in general and development planning in particular has been limited. When young people do engage, the activities are often triggered or facilitated by intermediaries such as youth associations, commune councillors and village chiefs. Given this reliance, it can be argued that without the role of intermediaries, youth still lack courage and remain passive.

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### Civic participation

Youth have limited knowledge of community-based organisations (CBOs) or local associations, and loose engagement with these organisations. However, volunteering attracts more youth involvement. Given the general passivity of CBOs, village chiefs play a prominent role in mobilising youth

volunteers (for the communal good and/or partisan interest). Economic, cultural and personal reasons underlie a lack of broad youth engagement in associations and volunteering. The need for higher income has driven many young people to become increasingly mobile and work outside their communities. Barriers to promoting youth civic participation are compounded by a lack of enthusiasm and restrictions from parents, while a lack of supporting mechanisms is an obstacle for those who want to be more civically engaged but are not sure of how to start. Youth organisations were identified as important catalysts for young people’s participation in society. Such peer groups have helped to develop young people’s understanding

of the political culture and provide opportunities for socialisation,<sup>2</sup> which are likely factors distinguishing the more active from the less active. Good relationships with commune authorities are crucial for this process.

### *Political engagement*

Apathy, deference, distance and fear are recurring features of Cambodia's social hierarchies and continue to pervade relationships between the government and the governed. For some youth, however, the feeling towards local officials is more of respect rather than of fear in that commune authorities are now vulnerable to being voted out. The formal political space opened through decentralisation means that youth can influence local decision-making through public (commune council and village) meetings and informal contacts with local officials. But the use of these rights has been limited, mostly to NGO-affiliated youths. Although there were no reported rejections of attendance requests, the formally public monthly commune council meeting is an "invited space". Further, when young people attend village meetings, they do so as representatives of their parents. Youth's peripheral role means that participatory planning activities essentially remain the domain of older people. There are divergent views on the suitability of young people joining village meetings. In spite of the differences, positive cases exist of commune councils integrating youth ideas and activities into commune plans. Informal contacts with local officials and written petitions, on the other hand, are rare.

### *Electoral participation*

Recent fieldwork noted that young people are generally enthusiastic about voting, seeing it as a right and a responsibility to choose good leaders and spur more development in their communities. It was also observed that voting is showing signs of becoming a norm, a result of conforming to

social trends. However, even as the number of young people registered to vote has increased significantly, high proportions of youth did not vote in the last two commune council elections. Yet the proportion of young commune councillors has risen from 1 percent in 2007 to 5 percent in 2012, a positive development welcomed by the public. In deciding which political party to vote for, young people look to demonstrated progress in local development, political party platforms and leadership, and candidates' ability to fulfil their election promises to the public. Such information reaches the public primarily through broadcast media and electoral campaigns. However, young people require more information about political parties to make better decisions. While voting is a popular democratic exercise, joining electoral campaigns can be a sensitive issue, particularly for youth organisation volunteers, who are obliged to follow the non-partisan status of their affiliated organisations and are unwilling to jeopardise their working relationships with local officials.

### **Discussion and conclusion**

Despite the implementation of decentralisation for more than a decade, citizen participation in general remains low. Our recent fieldwork suggests that there is also a low level of participation among the younger generation. Low youth participation is a problem that requires serious attention. The study indicates that the decentralisation objective of bringing about meaningful civic engagement in local governance has often come up against political, economic, cultural and personal barriers. Politically, commune councils' limited activities to promote youth participation mean that they remain secondary to non-governmental intermediaries. For instance, none of the communes we visited had a plan to make their agenda more attractive to young people and engage them in local rural governance. Effective implementation of the National Policy on Youth Development may improve the status quo. But as of now, the role of youth associations remains vitally important.

In spite of the problems besetting youth participation in local rural governance, empirical evidence shows that some steady, albeit uneven, progress is being made. Without downplaying the changing local political landscape, the study draws the following conclusions about the contribution of

2 "Socialization is largely a one-way process through which young people gain an understanding of the political world through their interaction with adults and the media. Political socialization is a process through which people develop the attitudes, values, beliefs and opinions conducive to becoming good citizens in their country ... is a particular type of political learning whereby people develop the attitudes, values, beliefs, opinions, and behaviors that are conducive to becoming good citizens in their country" (Anon. 2012).

decentralisation to youth participation in local rural governance.

First, the contribution of the decentralisation reform has been most discernible in the electoral process. That is, commune council elections provide capable youth the opportunity to become local representatives. Moreover, youth voice is and will continue to be significant in determining local political power structures because young people make up the largest share of the electorate, with 3.53 million or 37 percent of the 9.67 million registered voters in 2012 (NEC 2012).

Second, the reform has improved commune councils' working relationships with youth organisations and other non-governmental intermediaries, creating a more embracing local political environment conducive to nurturing a culture of participation. This study acknowledges the role of youth associations in helping not only to promote youth participation in local communities, but also to improve young people's civic and political knowledge and socialisation experiences through volunteer activities and training. Since the opening of Cambodia's political system in 1993, the number of NGOs and civil society organisations has increased significantly, and they are operating throughout the country to promote development and democracy. Following implementation of the decentralisation reform in 2002, a number of NGOs and civil society organisations have been engaged in activities to empower citizens to benefit from democratisation and the reform. Concurrently, a number of youth associations have been working locally to instil a sense of responsibility in young people with the aim of helping them to create a better future for themselves and their communities.

Lastly, decentralisation has necessitated a gradual shift of relations between commune councils and youth characterised by more respect and less fear. The change stems from facilitation and mediation from intermediaries (i.e. village chiefs, youth association leaders) and increased familiarity with the assigned roles and duties of commune councils, which entail representing the interests and fulfilling the needs of the people. Such knowledge creates performance expectations that might put social pressure on representatives to deliver satisfactory outcomes.

With insights from the empirical study, we conclude that the challenge of decentralisation is

to deepen youth participation in civic and political space. Processes at all levels must emphasise the roles of both locally elected representatives and civil society which, we argue, can accelerate the impact of decentralisation by overcoming some of the cultural and personal barriers to participation. This responsibility will fall mainly on the shoulders of political leaders, policymakers and civil society leaders, who can help shape the younger generations into Cambodia's greatest resource for the future. It will not be easy, but the following recommendations could help young people realise their individual potentials and thus actively engage in society.

### Policy suggestions

Measures that could encourage more youth participation in local governance are many but three key areas deserve special mention. First, further studies should be done by government agencies, political parties or NGOs to understand the relevance of local government to the issues that concern young people and to tackle the local problems affecting them. Following are some suggested topics for research:

- meeting the challenges and needs of youth, and defining the institutions that could meet them;
- commune councils' capacity to address the problems and concerns young people face;
- the capabilities necessary for commune councils to function as the link between upper levels of government and youth in providing information on how to seek study and employment opportunities;
- whether commune council agendas are substantial enough and relevant to young people's circumstances;
- youth perceptions of, and attitudes towards, commune council plans and political party platforms;
- the effect of formal and informal citizenship education on youth participation; and
- a more systematic study of the impact of gender, economic status, geographical location, education, political affiliation and family background on youth participation.

Second, the government should speed up implementation of the National Policy on Youth

Development adopted in 2011.<sup>3</sup> Without doubt, effective implementation of this policy not only provides youth a platform where their roles are recognised and they can formally participate in local development and decision-making, but also helps address the challenges (such as inadequate education, poor training and unemployment) hindering youth participation.

Third, the role of youth in decentralisation should be specially set out in the Law on Communes/*Sangkats* Administration and Management (2001) and the Law on Administrative Management of Capital, Provinces, Municipalities, Districts and *Khans* (2009). Since Cambodian youth have become politically, economically and socially important in the country, trying to engage them formally as much as possible in decentralisation would be advantageous to the community and society as a whole.

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<sup>3</sup> The objective of the policy is to "[d]evelop Cambodian youth in terms of physical strength, intellectual, consciousness, ethics, value, and skills so they will become a good citizen [sic] of broader society." One of the strategies of the policy is to promote youth participation in local communities, agencies and civil society organisations through formal mechanisms, for example, by having youth representatives on national and subnational committees and councils (MOEYS 2011, 2-5).